Miscommunication and Misunderstandings through Electronics

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ABSTRACT: This paper goes into depth about how people can easily misunderstand and miscommunicate through computer-mediated language and what it is that makes it so easy to miscommunicate and misunderstand

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What an amazing time to be alive. Have you considered everything that we have at our disposal? We have electricity, cars, cell phones, internet, computers, Facebook, Netflix and many more things. We have a bunch of technology that helps us meet new people, make relationships, communicate with family, catch up with old friends, or to tell someone about something. Well everyone has a cell phone now days and you can do all these things on a cell phone. So in essence we are always in constant communication with the rest of the world. Daantje Derks and Arnold Bakker (2010) that wrote the article *The Impact of E-mail Communication on Organizational Life*, they remind us that Messages “can be sent anytime and anywhere in seconds. It is a lot faster than sending regular mail that can take days or even weeks to reach them” (par 3).

One of the big things now days is to text or email people. Emailing is good for schools to get ahold of a professor or in a business you can send out a memo to everyone in the company to let them know about something that is going on. You can text people and have a conversation with someone without anyone knowing like if you are in a really boarding meeting/class you can just get out your phone and text your friend across the room. With texts you can also have multiple conversations going at the same time.

With this technology there comes draw backs. There are always times that people miscommunicate or misunderstand what someone is trying to get through a text or email. People might think that you’re mad at them when you are just trying to be sarcastic. People might think that you are kidding about something but really you’re serious. This sometimes leads to arguments, breakups, ends of friendships, and in some cases violence. If you want an example of how people are able to misinterpret messages and what that leads to, go to YouTube and search for Key & Peele - Text Message Confusion. This is a little bit extreme but it gets the point across in a humorous way. No matter how carful you are, someone will always find a way to misread your text or email and take it the wrong way. It’s just human nature to do so. In this paper, we look at different reasons that people misread texts and emails and also ways that to help communicate better through text and email.

**Secondary Research**

One of the issues people say is the main reason for misinterpreted texts and emails is because the lack of tone, and facial expressions, body expression, and verbal/nonverbal cues. Melissa Ritter, Ph.D. (2015) said that without these clarifying cues, “we have very little to help us discern what the other person is trying to tell us” (par 5). Without the cues that we have in our face-to-face communication or phone call communication, it can make it very hard for people to know exactly what we are trying to convey. Just have to assume what someone is trying to convey and hope for the best. In Martha Perry’s (2010) article *Face to Face Verses Computer Mediated Communication: Couples Satisfaction and Experience Across Conditions*, she said “the reduction of cues such as tone and facial expression and the lack of synchronization in message transmission impair a user’s ability to accurately interpret message meaning or perceived emotion” (par 7). What she is saying is that without the cues, there is no way to accurately interpret a text or email or the emotion the sender is trying to convey.

In Kristen Betts (2009) article *Lost in Translation: Importance of Effective Communication in Online Education*, this chart breaks down how much of what aspects are used in Face-to-Face communication. Note how the biggest parts of Face-to-Face communication are with our tone and nonverbal cues. It makes up 93% of our communication. Only 7% are the actual words we use in a conversation. The importance of this should not be overlooked. When we text or email someone, we are only using 7% of our communication skills that we would use in a normal Face-to-Face communication. It’s like in charades, how you are only able to convey ideas with your nonverbal cues. If you think that’s hard that’s 55% of Face-to-Face communication. Words are just 7%.

Also in Kristen Betts (2009) article *Lost in Translation: Importance of Effective Communication in Online Education*, this chart breaks down how much of what aspects are used in telephone communication. Note how big tone plays a part in telephone communication. It’s 86% of our communication. Only 7% are the actual words we use in the conversation. The importance of this should not be overlooked. When we text or email someone, we are only using 14% of our communication skills that we would use in a normal telephone communication. If you only take 14% of anything, you can’t make heads or tails of what you have right in front of you.

There are ways you express emotion and tone through texts and emails to help the messages be better understood. Sarah Schafer’s (2000) article *E-Mail's Impersonal Tone Easily Misunderstood / Conflicts can arise from mistyped, misperceived messages*, said that one way to “cut down on confusion” is to add “caps, abbreviations, and emoticons” or some people call them emoji’s (par 22). These are a few good ways to put some tone and emotions into your texts and emails. You can put a word or a whole sentence caps to help people get that you are serious. You can also add abbreviations to add humor to your tone like LOL which stands for laughing out loud. Another thing you can add to your messages are emoticons. Emoticons are just little pictures the size of a letter that you type. They can be a smiley face for a joke, a frowny face for being sad, or a little piece of poop with eyeballs just to be goofy.

Another Reason for reason for misinterpreted texts and emails is because of sender errors. Sender errors are things that the sender does to make it harder for the reader to be able to understand the meaning of a text or email. One reason the senders make an error is because there are a million ways to say and communicate the same word but have different meanings. In Emily Chins (2013) article *Online Communication fosters Misinterpretation* shares that “there are a million ways to say the word ‘yes’ in real life, and they range from sounding incredibly annoyed and reluctant and sounding extremely happy and accepting” (par 5). With all the different ways to say the same word with different meanings just by how it sounds when you hear it said, how are you able to distinguish that through a text how someone meant something as simple as a yes. Without being able to hear how they said it, there is no way to tell how someone meant it. The only thing you have to go off of is just previous texts or emails. Another thing that Terri Main (2006) said in his article *Computer Mediated Communication – What does it mean to you* is that messages can be “misunderstood because someone doesn’t see the playful smile or hear the ironic tone in one’s voice” (par 4). Without the sight of seeing a simple smile can make someone completely get the wrong idea about what the message is actually meaning.

Another sender error is when you are sending multiple messages at the same time. With more messages come more mistakes. In the article *Lost in Translation: Importance of Effective Communication in Online Education* by Kristen Betts (2009), she stated that “as communication increases, there is a greater opportunity for the message to be lost in translation” (par 13). What she is explaining is that when someone is having multiple conversations, it is more likely to be jumbled up in communication. When you have a lot of conversations going at once, it is more likely that you might accidently send to one person when you intended it for another.

The last Reason for reason for misinterpreted texts and emails is because of the receivers/readers errors. Reader errors are where it is the readers own doing that they misunderstood or misinterpreted a message. The first reason there might be a reader error is because of their emotional state of mind. In Kristen Byron’s (2008) article *Carrying too Heavy a Load? The Communication and Miscommunication of Emotion by Email*, she said that a receiver will interpret a message with their “internal state” of mind (par 63). Daniel Goleman (2007) also talked more about a receivers internal state of mind in his article *E-Mail is Easy to write (and to Misread)*, he said “we tend to misinterpret positive e-mail messages as more neutral, and neutral ones as more negative than the sender intended. Even jokes are rated as less funny by recipients than by senders” and “the sender internally ‘hears’ emotional overtones” even though they are not able to be sent in a message (par 11,12). Without the reader being able to hear those internal, emotional overtones, the reader assumes it worse than the sender meant it.

Another reason for reader errors is because as humans, we assume the worst. As the reader, we tend to read messages worse than they are originally intended to be. In the article *Why It’s So Hard to Detect Emotion in Emails and Texts* by Eric Jaffe (2014), he said “we assume the worst in questionable [texts and emails]” (par 10). When we get a text or email that we find to be questionable on how the sender meant it, we just assume the worst. He also said that “emoticons and exclamation points only do so much” (par 2). The sender can try their very hardest to help make it more clear to the reader on how they meant it, but there is only so much you can do to help them. If the reader is going to be assuming the worst, then they will find something in the message that in there head is going to be worse. Melissa Ritter, Ph.D. (2015) wrote an article called *Why is There So Much Miscommunication Via Email and Text?* about how we interpret messages through our emotions. She said “If we are feeling criticized, we will read criticism into the words,” and “if we are anxious about demands being made on us, many messages will read as imperatives” (par 5). Whatever our emotions are currently will determine how we read the messages. Emotions play a big role on how we interpret any conversation we have face to face and without the conversational cues in messages, we are left to our own interpretations.

One thing that can help us have a better understanding on what the other person is saying is to get to know that person and have a Face-to-Face communication. Daniel Goleman (2007) said that “people who know each other well, it turns out, are less likely to have these misunderstandings” (par 14). If you know someone well enough, you have a better idea on how they say things and then you have a better idea on how to interpret their messages. Derek R. Lane (1994) wrote in his article *Computer-Mediated Communication in the Classroom: Asset or Liability?* That knowing the person your messaging will most likely make it so you have less “barriers” than someone you hardly know (par 35). Having barriers make it hard to interpret messages right. We can tear down those barriers just by getting to know the person. It’s simple and it doesn’t take long.

**Primary Research**

For my personal research, I conducted a few interviews to see how different age groups viewed and interpreted texts and emails and to see if age has a difference on how people text/email and how they read them. One person was an 18 year old, high school senior that has basically grown up his whole life texting. The other person was a 73 year old that started out not growing up with phones or computers but now have been introduced to texting and emailing and does it on a more frequent basis. I hoped to find out what a younger person and an older person thinks of texting and email, why there is miscommunication in texting and email, and how they text or email.

I first interviewed the 73 year old. The first question I asked them was how often they text and email and to whom. They said that they send a couple texts and emails a day and to mainly family or friends. I then went on to ask them about how they text and/or emailed others. They said that they try not to be too serious through text and emails, just basic communicating. They only time they try to be funny or convey humor through texting or emailing is when they were communicating with family and never really tried to be funny with other acquaintances. Another thing they said with humor is that they never used emoji’s.

The next question I asked them was what their thoughts were on texting and emailing. They said that they enjoy texting and emailing. They said they liked it because it was easy and faster than postal mail. Another reason why they like to text and email is because they can express their ideas better while writing rather than through words or Face-to-Face communication. Another reason they like to text and email is because it may be easier to pick up the phone and call, but it is much harder to get ahold of someone especially with the younger generation. They said it was an easy way to say hi but not to bug them. They can get back to you when they are able to. It is also a good way to keep in touch and to keep people in the loop.

When I asked why people misunderstand texts and emails, they said that they don’t encounter too much miscommunication through texts and emails. They said that they don’t make very many mistakes like typos, and they don’t use texting lingo like brb for ‘be right back’ or ttyl for ‘talk to you later’. They like to keep it more in a letter form. It makes is simpler for les misunderstanding.

The second interview was with the 18 year old, High School senior. The first question I asked them was how often they text and email and to whom. His first response was ‘since this interview started one’. That was only 30 seconds in. They said that they send about 50 texts a day to friends and family.

The next question I asked them was what their thoughts were on texting and emailing. They said that it takes them longer because he has to retype things because their thumbs are too big and keep hitting other buttons. They prefer to talk to people on the phone because it is more personal. They also say that it is quicker and avoids some of the misunderstandings. They don’t use abbreviations like ‘LOL’ and ‘brb’. They said that they use humor in texts and emails. They convey the humor and emotions through emoji’s, explanation marks, and capitals.

When I asked why people misunderstand texts and emails, they said that they don’t proof read the messages before they send them. They said that you don’t really need too because it is an informal way of communication. They said that this has been part of the miscommunication and also the auto-correcting feature on your phone. They told a couple of examples. One was where they sent ‘someone is smoking pot’ and it auto corrected to ‘someone is sucking cock’. Another example is someone meant to send him ‘the sledding hill is in prime condition’ when it actually sent ‘the sledding hill is in porn condition’. Clearly the things that were sent and the things that they meant were two completely different things.

From this research, I have learned that one of the big reasons for misunderstandings through texts and emails is largely because of not proof reading tests and auto-correct. Another thing I learned from the research was that older people have less communication errors than younger people do because older people use texts and emails in a more formal way causing less confusion.

**Discussion**

There are many theories on why there is miscommunication and misinterpretations through texts and emails. Some of the ideas are because of the lack of tone and cues, sender errors, and reader errors.

A lot of people think that the main reasons for miscommunication and misinterpretations through texts and emails is because of the lack of tone and cues. For our brains to fully understand and how to perceive a conversation, we need to use the tone that someone is speaking and some cues like a body stance or a smile to know how to take a conversation. Without the tones and cues you would normally get in a Face-to-Face conversation, you are running blind. Studies have shown that the actual words of a conversation only make up communication and only 14% of telephone communication and only 7% of Face-to-Face communication.

The second idea people have for miscommunication and misinterpretation through text and email is because of errors by the sender. When the sender is not very clear on what they are trying to send, it leads to confusion because there is a million different ways to say the same word. Another reason is because they are not completely focused on the conversations because of having multiple conversations going on at once. They might send something that was meant for another person.

The last idea people have for miscommunication and misinterpretation through text and email is because of reader error. The ability to decipher a text or email is mostly due to the emotional of mind. If you are in a sad mood you read it as more sad than it was intended. Another error by readers is that they assume the worst. If there is any question of what the message is supposed to mean, we automatically just assume the worst.

I believe the reason for miscommunication and misinterpretation in texts and emails based on all of the research is because of the lack of proof reading and reader error.

If people proof read their messages before they sent them, it would help make sure that the message said what they wanted the message to say and make sure there aren’t any silly misspellings that might confuse the reader. It’s like if you were going on a trip somewhere and you ask if he wanted to come with you and you told him that he can invite his girlfriend. But instead of sending invite, you accidentally auto-correct invite to inflate. So now it reads, you can inflate your girlfriend. Now you just sound like a jerk because you didn’t take an extra 10 second of your time to make sure the message said what you actually wanted to say. Another example is if one of your friends were having a party and you wanted to ask them how many people they were expecting to come. Except it accidently said executing, how many people are you executing. Now your friend doesn’t know what to think about you. In these two examples, this confusion could have been avoided if they would have just quickly checked their message to make sure it was right.

The other reason I think there is miscommunication and misinterpretation is because of reader error. The readers emotional state of the reader is the main reason because technically, the reader is changing the message in their mind other than the sender sent it. The human brain is a very delicate thing and also one of the most stubborn thing in the body. Your brain assumes the worst and will make the messages sound worse than they really are. The brain hears what it wants to hear. Like if the reader is feeling like they are not doing anything right, the messages they receive will come across like they are being criticized for something. The brain is telling your body that you can’t do anything right so it is construing anything to help convince your body to of that too.

With all the new advancements we have, we can still make things more complicated than things were in the past. Texting and emailing was not a luxury item in the civil war like we have today. I’m sure that they had misunderstandings and misinterpretations but there probably were not as many and definitely not to the same degree as it is today. They didn’t have to worry about their letter autocorrecting while they were writing it. Even with all these downfalls with new technology’s, the pros still outweigh the cons. This is truly an amazing time to be alive.

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